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Funding keeps Metra in neutral



A Metra train passes over 79th Street on Chicago's South Side. Metra intends to build a station at 79th once the state provides the necessary funding. (Tribune photo by Antonio Perez / December 28, 2009)

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By Patty Pensa
Special to the Tribune
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Two planned **Metra** stations could transform neighborhoods on the city's South and North Sides — spurring economic development, curbing carbon emissions and making it just plain easier for residents to choose public transportation, proponents say.

But when that vision will become reality is uncertain.

Metra officials say state money must be in hand before preliminary engineering work can begin on planned stations at 79th Street on the Rock Island District line and Peterson and Ridge avenues on the **Union Pacific** North line. The state is paying for the new construction, while also rebuilding and repairing more than two dozen other stations, with \$136 million from its public works program.

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Once construction starts, it would be two to three years before the new stations would open. But that timeline is "contingent on getting state money. It could be delayed," said Metra spokeswoman Meg Reile.

Money for the projects has been approved but depends on the sale of general obligation bonds, which will occur early in 2010. Even then, the money will not come as one lump sum and state transportation officials will determine which projects get priority. They could not be reached to explain how the projects will be prioritized.

"My concern is I don't want them to run out of money and everyone else's project is funded and we run into another economic downturn," said state Sen. Jacqueline Collins, D-Chicago, whose district would house the 79th Street station. "Can they guarantee my project is a priority?"

Collins and community leaders have pushed for the new Metra station at 79th Street in the Auburn Gresham community as part of an effort to revitalize the once-vibrant business thoroughfare. They see the Metra station as an anchor that would usher in new businesses and boost employment opportunities for residents.

Though vacant lots remain, new businesses are sprouting up along 79th Street, a dense and bustling artery that is the **Chicago Transit Authority's** busiest route – almost 35,000 riders board on weekdays.

Many of those bus riders might instead ride Metra, which would reduce environmentally unfriendly bus traffic, said Carlos Nelson, executive director of the Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corp. Professionals who drive to work downtown also could opt for the train, he said.

"There are few Metra stations in the South Side communities," said Nelson, who provided Metra officials with a needs assessment in 2004.

Metra trains leaving the LaSalle Street station downtown don't stop until 87th Street.

"That's more than 10 miles of no stops into the Loop," Nelson said. "That just doesn't make sense. The demand is definitely there."

Metra officials were unable to provide ridership projections for the two planned stations, citing thin staffing during the holiday week. Reile, the Metra spokeswoman, said the sites on the South and North Sides were selected because "they are what we see as gaps in service." Both sites had stations in the past.

Lobbying by elected officials played a large role in making those areas a priority for new stations, Reile said.

Metra will spend \$11.5 million on the 79th Street station and \$5 million on the station at Peterson and Ridge. The money will pay for engineering costs and basic station construction such as platforms and stairways. Elected officials must find money for any enhancements like parking or a nicer station building.

Collins plans to ask for \$10 million in federal funds for an enclosed station through U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, D-Ill., and **U.S. Sen. Roland Burris**, D-Ill.

On the North Side, state Rep. **Harry Osterman**, D-Chicago, said an additional \$10 million from the state capital bill should suffice for now. He wants the station at Peterson and Ridge avenues to have ample parking and a design that's "a nice fit for the community."

The station would be an added stop on the Union Pacific North line that runs from downtown Chicago to Kenosha, Wis. It would help ease heavy traffic between the city and suburbs, especially the bottleneck at Ridge, said Osterman, who has advocated for a new station for at least five years.

"It's going to create another public transportation that would be an asset for people in the community," he said. "My strong belief is the ridership will be there, and over a period of time it will be one of the most used stations."

Though it will take at least three years for the station to be built, Osterman said, "it will be well worth the wait."

New stations can attract new businesses and help reduce traffic congestion, said **Douglas Ferguson**, senior transportation policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which is not involved in the Metra projects.

Denise Nicholes, co-owner of Perfect Peace Cafe & Bakery in Auburn Gresham, looks forward to a Metra station on 79th Street. Since opening in 2007, business has been slow because of the poor economy.

"I think that would be great," she said. "We really do need one. It may even bring more passengers to Metra because it would be more convenient."

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First of all these new station could be served by a local that turns at Evanston. But first the express

track should be replaced. The track allowed trains to pass other trains doing station work. It was part of the downgrading of the railroad after the 400's the trains to Milwaukee-Madison-Minneapolis-Duluth were discontinued. The speed also should go back up to 90mph at least. Fares on Metra will soon be going up to cover the bank processing fees for people who charge their tickets. This money could have been used to replace that track or build these stations.

[amtrakpax \(12/30/2009, 4:25 PM\)](#)

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First of all these new stations could be served by short Evanston turns. The most important project, that Metra is not thinking of is to replace the express track that was ripped out. When the intercity trains to Milwaukee, Madison and Minneapolis were taken out. (THE 400's) This would permit the thru expresses to pass the locals doing station work. Also bringing the speed back up to 90mph would help too. The ATC system is still there so shouldn't be a problem with signaling. Too bad our younger riders don't how much the rail system was downgraded, slowed down, and dumm sized years ago. Metra will have to raise fares again and soon to cover these people who want to charge their tickets. The processing fees to banks will be millions of wasted dollars on top of all the bailouts to these banks many of which are controlled by foreign investors.

[amtrakpax \(12/30/2009, 4:17 PM\)](#)

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Poor planning rears it's low-browed head once again.

The reason Metra trains don't stop between 87th and LaSalle Street station is that, in the overall plan, the local CTA system is supposed to handle those users. Next thing you'll know, we'll have Metra stopping every 4 blocks from 127th Street all the way downtown. Anyone ever taken a Saturday Rock Island train that goes "local"??? Horrible. You need airplanes to fly from Chicago to New York, you don't need airplanes landing, taking off, landing, taking off at every little podunk puddle between Chicago and New York.

This is a bad bad precedent. It will only lengthen the ride for the 10's of thousands of passengers who are traveling from farther south to benefit a few already over-served transit riders. It will make getting home before dark even less likely for those who will now have to make still another stop just 6 blocks away from the existing 87th Street station. I thought Metra was part of the RTA, which was responsible for REGIONAL transportation, who should realize that that area is already well-served with public transit options, one of which is catching public transit to travel a mere 6 blocks south to catch a Metra train at an already existing station.

[@\(-_-\)@ \(12/30/2009, 11:07 AM\)](#)

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